Composing with MIDI
A MIDI Studio

Dennis Pim
Simon could you tell us a little bit about your background (CAP OFF) and how you got into composing for film and TV?

Simon Whiteside
I studied music at degree level and my specialism was composition. When I'd finished that after a short gap of being in the real world I went to the national film and television school to do their postgraduate film composition course. And that's where I met a lot of my colleagues who I work with now in the industry. My music's always been described as evocative and emotional I've not really been into the academic side of music serialism and the like.

And also I perform, I'm a Jazz Pianist, so I'm still performing music and that feeds in well to film music really, 'cause there's a lot of popular and Jazz music involved obviously in writing for film.

Dennis Pim
And when you started composing did it start as just notation and how did your studio build up to what it is today?

Simon Whiteside
Well my first compositions were in that piano with a pen and paper. And in fact I started in church music when I was in the choir I used to write chants and hymns and things. I got my first midi system in about 1992, 3 when computers were, music computers were in their infancy really. And slowly over time I've developed a set of instruments and sounds but I'm constantly upgrading and I spend a lot of money, in any one year, I'll be upgrading constantly. My most recent piece of equipment will, I only bought a few weeks. So it's a constantly changing thing. Technology moves on, things are done better and one gets rid of the old and brings in the new.

Dennis Pim
You've got a lot of equipment in your studio, perhaps you could talk a little bit about what the equipment is and what it does?

Simon Whiteside
The two things that I use are primarily a computer to store the information and keyboards or various boxes to play sounds back. This is my master keyboard 88 weighted keys.

And it simulates the feel of a piano. This directly links via this midi cable here into my midi interface. I have three main types of instrument in here. The first type is a sampler. That means that it's a blank canvas in which I can load various types of sounds for example one type maybe a string ensemble or I might choose to load in some drum sounds. One of my samplers which is over here, has a keyboard attached. And if I wish to play that I can do. At the moment my midi local is set to off so if I just flip that to on then I can play the sound of a trumpet. And, just to show you I can also trigger that from here.

This is my second sampler, which has, has much less memory so at the moment it hasn't actually got any sounds in it.

Then I have a set of synthesisers, i.e. sounds that have no audio reference to the world of acoustic instruments for want of a better word, and one of those has a keyboard and one

them doesn't and they make sounds by synthesising sounds from raw material making the sounds that you hear in dance music primarily. And then right here in the centre of studio I have my two main workhorse sound sets. This is a Rowland 10-80, which is the predecessor of the 50-80, which is a sampler and a sample playback device and also a synthesiser all in one.

The reason it's the main one is because it's a thirty-two channel instrument i.e. it has two midi inputs and I can get most of what I want out of that particular instrument and then add the special stuff from the other instruments on top of that.

We have here four screens. This screen here is a basic PC. I use that for my internet connection and I prefer to keep my music computer unconnected to the internet for the reasons of viruses and hacking. Over here is a flat screen television which plays back any movie footage that I'm going to be using in my guise as a film composer. And then we come to these two screens. These two screens are connected to one computer the G4 down here. It's very useful to be able to see more than one window open at any one time, but as you can see I can move that across there, and I can have various screen sets, set up so I can see different sets of things on the two screens.

This is Emagic's logic platinum and it allows me to record midi information and audio information and manipulate both of those and that comes basically all controlled by the G4 computer down here. However once I've got all the sounds together I need to make them into a mix and that happens over here.

Simon Whiteside
I have a thirty-two channel mixer plus a twenty channel sub mixer so all of the outputs of various keyboard boxes that I've mentioned come into this mixing desk. And also the sound card of the computer is connected to the first sixteen channels of this desk.

What I can do with this mixing desk is alter the volume, the timbre, the stereo position, I can add reverb, compression and what's called aural excitation to add extra erm frisson to the final mix sound. But eventually when I'm happy with the mix, which I will have been monitoring through these bi-amped Genelec speakers, near field speakers, I then mix the whole thing back onto the computer and record it into a stereo file which you can actually see a version of something I've done ending up there.

Dennis Pim
Do you find that space is a problem in your studio, do you find you want more equipment or is the equipment getting smaller so you can fit more in?

Simon Whiteside
If I had a budget to start from scratch I would end up with considerably less than I have, it's the organic process which has, has caused me to keep things rather than get rid of them I suppose. Electronic equipment is err, very depreciable so you buy something for £2000 in year 1 and by year 3 it's not worth a 100. That sort of investment you don't tend to like to see go away.

But if I started from scratch, yes you could get it all into one computer, in fact you could get it all into a laptop with a few add on boxes if you needed to.